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TITLE: The Attributes of a Simple HIV Risk Assessment Tool That Numerically Measures an Individuals' Risk of Acquiring HIV

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ISSUE: In a substance abuse treatment center setting, HIV risk assessments are frequently done because they deal with clients who are at a higher risk for acquiring HIV than the general population. Many of these assessments rate the client only as being at low, moderate, or high risk, while other assessments are lengthy and time consuming. Often the intake worker or counselor does these assessments, and the specific high-risk behaviors are not identified or discussed. These risky behaviors may not even become part of the treatment plan for the client. If there is a treatment plan, there has been no way to measure the outcome. Referrals for HIV testing are not always made. Many counselors are reluctant to delve into clients' sexual histories and may fail to see a clear cut relationship between HIV risk reduction and substance abuse relapse prevention.

SETTING: Substance Abuse Treatment Centers

PROJECT: To address these issues, Shanti of Southeast Alaska developed a simple HIV risk assessment inventory, ISOS (Injection Drug Use, Sexual History, Occupational Hazards, Substance Abuse) that assigns a numerical score to the clients' HIV high-risk practices. The instrument is concise, simple, accurate, and reliable. Our goal was to see if the numerical score could be used as a pre- and post- test that would actually measure the clients' risk reduction goal attainment while they are in substance abuse treatment. Along with the actual test, a list of HIV risk reduction goals were also formulated so the counselors could insert the appropriate objectives into the clients' treatment plan.

RESULTS: The program is in effect in two substance abuse treatment centers and the Public Health Department in Ketchikan, Alaska. Counselors are using the HIV inventory to identify important recovery issues including: openness boundaries, empowerment, communication, and honesty. They are regularly sending to us their clients' anonymous ISOS scores, and we know that individuals who continue substance abuse treatment have lessened their risk of acquiring HIV and are on stronger footing in relationship to their recovery as witnessed by their attainment of the established treatment goals.

LESSONS LEARNED: Substance abuse counselors and administrators generally feel that they have hectic schedules that are not amenable to inserting new goals and objectives for their clients. We have seen that once we give them a simple tool, which measures progress towards some of the treatment goals and discuss the sobriety enhancing aspect of looking at HIV high-risk behaviors to counselors, their resistance decreases. During intake sessions, questionnaires that give a numerical value on an individuals' status are beneficial, yet we had not come across a test like ISOS for measure HIV risk. If this HIV risk assessment and risk reduction program is continued for a longer period of time, into continuing care for example, the positive treatment results will be greater.

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